Epistemic Injustice in the Digital Age: Social Media, Silencing, and the Politics of Credibility

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Abstract

This article explores the evolving contours of epistemic injustice in the digital age, with particular focus on the role of social media in both perpetuating and challenging these injustices. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's foundational concepts of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, the paper examines how algorithmic structures, influencer cultures, and digital hierarchies affect the credibility and interpretability of marginalized voices. It interrogates the mechanisms by which epistemic authority is constructed online and highlights how marginalized groups—such as Dalits, women, and indigenous communities—are often discredited, silenced, or rendered unintelligible in mainstream digital discourse. At the same time, the paper explores the emergence of epistemic counter publics that resist these dominant narratives and reclaim space for alternative ways of knowing. The study concludes by calling for a critical epistemic ethics of the digital public sphere—one that ensures inclusivity, interpretive justice, and equitable knowledge production in our increasingly networked societies.

Keywords— Knowledge, Digital, Dominant, Connectivity, Interpretive

I. INTRODUCTION

In an era defined by digital connectivity, social media platforms have become the new battlegrounds for knowledge production, dissemination, and validation. While these platforms promise democratized access to information and offer previously unheard voices a chance to speak, they simultaneously reinforce and amplify systemic epistemic injustices. The concept of epistemic injustice, first articulated by Miranda Fricker, refers to the wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. It encompasses testimonial injustice, where a speaker's word is given less credibility due to prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, where marginalized groups are deprived of the interpretive resources necessary to make sense of their experiences. In the context of social media, these injustices take on new, technologically mediated forms. The credibility of voices is often determined not by the strength of reason or evidence, but by algorithms, popularity metrics, and audience biases. Epistemic silencing occurs both subtly and overtly—through trolling, de-platforming, and algorithmic invisibility. At the same time, dominant frameworks often fail to account for the

lived realities of oppressed communities, resulting in hermeneutical marginalization. The lack of adequate interpretive tools to understand digital forms of oppression—such as cyberbullying, doxxing, or algorithmic discrimination—further exacerbates the issue. However, the digital sphere is not only a site of epistemic exclusion but also of resistance and rearticulation. The rise of counter publics—like Dalit Twitter, feminist blogs, and indigenous TikTok channels—has enabled marginalized communities to develop and share alternative epistemologies. These spaces offer interpretive frameworks that challenge the epistemic authority of dominant discourses and assert the legitimacy of suppressed knowledge systems. This article aims to critically examine how epistemic injustice operates in the age of social media, interrogate the digital mechanisms that reproduce it, and highlight the forms of resistance that emerge in response. In doing so, it calls for an epistemic ethics appropriate to the digital public sphere—one that foregrounds inclusivity, credibility equity, and the protection of diverse knowledge systems in a rapidly evolving information ecosystem.

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Indian Philosophy:

Indian philosophy is marked by a distinctive set of concerns, methods, and insights that set it apart from Western traditions. Indian thinkers posed original questions, such as those relating to the *origin (utpatti)* and *apprehension (jñapti)* of *truth (prāmāṇya)*—problems that Western philosophy largely did not address. While less focused on distinctions like analytic vs. synthetic judgments or contingent vs. necessary truths, Indian philosophy offered nuanced explorations of consciousness, knowledge, and liberation. The foundations of Indian philosophical thought are found in the Vedic hymns, composed around the 2nd millennium BCE. These are the earliest textual reflections on the human mind's engagement with divinity and myth, leading to profound cosmological and spiritual conceptions. Following the Vedas, the Upanishads—speculative philosophical texts—introduced one of the earliest ideas of a universal, all-pervading spiritual reality. They laid the groundwork for monism: the belief in the essential unity of matter and spirit. The Upanishads also posed significant questions about nature, life, consciousness, the human body, ethics, and social philosophy. These concerns continued into the classical systems of Indian philosophy known as the *darśanas*. These orthodox schools explored, often in great depth:

- The nature of the individual self (*jīva*) and its finitude,
- The relationship between body, mind, and self (*ātman*),
- The sources and kinds of valid knowledge (*pramāṇas*),
- The origin and nature of truth,
- The types of entities that can be said to exist,
- The debate between realism and idealism,
- The question of whether universals or relations are more fundamental.

A core concern running through much of Indian philosophy is the idea of moksha—*liberation* or *release*. This concept deals with the nature of human bondage, the possibility of freedom, and the various philosophical and practical paths to liberation—whether through knowledge (*jñāna*), action (*karma*), or devotion (*bhakti*).

Definition of Philosophy:

The word *philosophy* comes from two Greek words: *philo* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom). Hence, philosophy literally means "love of wisdom." As rational beings, humans possess an innate desire to understand themselves and the world around them. Philosophy is an expression of this intellectual pursuit. It reflects our natural urge to comprehend the universe and our place within it. One cannot live without some form of philosophical framework; the real choice lies between a well-formed worldview and a flawed one.

Origin of Philosophy:

According to Aristotle, philosophy begins in wonder. Early humans were awestruck and confused by natural phenomena such as rain, storms, and celestial bodies. These experiences led them to ponder life, death, and the forces governing the universe. Initially, humans tried to explain these through magic—assuming nature was controlled by human-like powers. Over time, magic evolved into science (as natural causes were sought), religion (as supernatural agents were believed in), and philosophy (as attempts to understand the whole reality through reasoning).

Subject Matter of Philosophy:

Philosophy aims to construct a rational worldview. Unlike individual sciences, which study specific aspects of reality—mathematics studies numbers, physics studies energy and matter, psychology examines mental processes, etc.—philosophy attempts to synthesize insights from all these disciplines to form a comprehensive understanding of the universe. It explores fundamental concepts like time, space, mind, life, and matter, and investigates their interrelationships. It also addresses the nature of reality, the existence of God, the purpose of life, and the connection between the universe and the human soul. At its core, philosophy is the art of systematic and logical thinking about all aspects of reality.

Philosophical Problems:

The foundational questions of philosophy remain largely consistent across Eastern and Western traditions. These questions are broad and universal in scope, unlike scientific problems which often arise from specific contexts. Some classic philosophical problems include:

- What is knowledge?
- What is the nature of the world?
- Is there a creator or God?
- Who am I?
- What is the goal of life?
- Why should one live?
- What is the purpose of existence?

Major Branches of Philosophy:

Epistemology – This is the philosophical study of knowledge. It examines the nature, scope, and limits of knowledge, as well as concepts such as truth, belief, and

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justification. It questions how we know what we know and distinguishes between valid and invalid knowledge.

Metaphysics – Concerned with the nature of reality, metaphysics explores fundamental questions such as: What is existence? Is there a God? What is the relationship between mind and matter? It deals with the self, the cosmos, and the divine, and includes subfields like ontology (the study of being), theology, cosmology, and the philosophy of self.

Axiology – This branch focuses on the study of values. It includes:

- o **Ethics**, which examines moral values and the nature of right and wrong;

- o **Aesthetics**, which studies beauty, art, and taste;

- o **Logic**, which investigates principles of correct reasoning, including types of propositions, inference, hypotheses, and definitions.

The Development and Scope of Epistemology:

Although philosophical problems can be classified in various ways, the most effective and widely accepted division of philosophy is into ontology (metaphysics), epistemology, and axiology (including ethics and aesthetics). Among these, epistemology—the study of knowledge—stands as one of the central branches. However, the terminology associated with epistemology is relatively modern. In the 17th and 18th centuries, no specific term existed for this field. Philosophers addressed epistemological issues in key works such as Descartes' *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Berkeley's *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Leibniz's *New Essays on Human Understanding*, and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant referred to some of his epistemological reflections as "transcendental aesthetic," based on the Greek word *aisthesis*, meaning sensory cognition. However, he also helped shape the modern use of "aesthetics" as the philosophy of beauty. Earlier still, Alexander Baumgarten introduced the term *gnoseologia* (1769), and in German philosophy, terms like *Erkenntnistheorie* (theory of knowledge), *Erkenntnislehre*, and *Theorie der Erkenntnis* gained traction in the 19th century. James Frederick Ferrier was the first to introduce the English term *epistemology* in *Institutes of Metaphysics* (1854). Other names for this field included *Wissenschaftslehre* (Fichte, Bolzano), *Wissenschaftstheorie* (Eugen Dühring), *criteriology*, and *noetics*—the latter two used mainly by Neo-Thomists. Despite this variety, *epistemology* and *Erkenntnistheorie*

have become the most widely used terms today. The variation in terminology reflects differing conceptions of what epistemology encompasses. In its broader sense, epistemology includes all inquiries related to knowledge and cognition—spanning psychology, sociology, logic, history, and even metaphysics. In a narrower or more precise sense, it focuses specifically on the sources, nature, validity, and limits of knowledge, aiming to understand what knowledge is, how it is acquired, and how it can be justified. Typical questions in epistemology include: *What is knowledge?* Is knowledge derived from the senses or from reason? Can we achieve certainty? What is truth? Are there boundaries beyond which knowledge is impossible? While it's challenging to draw a strict line between the broader and narrower interpretations of epistemology, these classical questions represent a consistent and identifiable tradition throughout the history of philosophical inquiry.

II. EARLY EPISTEMOLOGY: FROM PRE-SOCRATICS TO PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

The first Ionian philosophers were primarily concerned with metaphysics and cosmology, but early epistemological ideas emerged in thinkers like Heraclitus (on the limits of sense perception), the Pythagoreans (on direct cognition), and the Eleatics (Parmenides on the identity of thinking and being). The development of deductive reasoning, especially by the Pythagoreans and Eleatics, laid foundational ground for epistemology. Empedocles and Anaxagoras further contributed to the understanding of sense cognition and reason (nous). Democritus introduced a form of critical realism, distinguishing primary and secondary qualities. The Sophists, especially Protagoras, offered relativistic and sceptical views, while Socrates emphasized the role of universal concepts in knowledge.

Plato's Epistemology:

Plato built upon Socratic ideas and proposed a sharp distinction between *knowledge (episteme)* and *opinion (doxa)*. Knowledge, for him, is a justified true belief grounded in the realm of eternal, unchanging *Forms*, which are accessible only through reason, not senses. Sensory experience leads only to opinion, which is uncertain and changeable. Plato divided knowledge into two types: *noesis* (intuitive, highest form) and *dianoia* (discursive, mathematical reasoning). He proposed the theory of recollection (anamnesis), arguing that the immortal soul recalls knowledge from its prior existence in the realm of Forms. His famous "Allegory of the Cave" illustrates the contrast between the world of senses and the higher world of Forms. Plato's rationalism had both methodological (a priorism) and genetic (nativism) aspects. However, his strict definition of knowledge raised enduring problems in

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epistemology, particularly around the exclusion of opinion as a form of knowledge and the ambiguity of defining knowledge strictly as justified true belief.

Aristotle's Epistemology:

Aristotle, Plato's student, rejected both apriorism and nativism. He offered an empirical theory of knowledge grounded in sense perception (*a posteriori* knowledge). For Aristotle, knowledge starts with sensory experience and is refined through abstraction by reason, allowing us to grasp general principles from particular instances. He retained Plato's term *episteme* but redefined its basis: Forms exist within substances, not in a separate realm. Knowledge arises from the interaction between passive perception and the active intellect. Scientific knowledge, for Aristotle, is built through syllogistic reasoning from self-evident principles—forming the basis of a deductive system of science, which influenced scientific methodology for nearly 2,000 years. Despite, later criticisms of his system, especially during the Middle Ages, Aristotle's contributions to logic, scientific method, and the theory of truth were foundational in shaping Western epistemology.

Digital Hermeneutics and Epistemic Inequality:

The digital age, and more specifically the rise of social media platforms, has dramatically transformed the way knowledge is produced, shared, validated, and consumed. While this democratization of information dissemination has led to unprecedented access and participation, it has also amplified deep-seated epistemic injustices. These injustices are not only persistent in new digital contexts but are often exacerbated by the very mechanisms of social media. Drawing on the concept of *epistemic injustice* introduced by Miranda Fricker, we can critically explore two major forms—testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice—within today's media-saturated landscape.

Testimonial Injustice: Silencing in the Algorithmic Public Sphere

Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is unjustly deflated due to prejudice. On social media, this manifests in multiple ways:

- **Marginalized voices are algorithmically devalued**: The algorithms that govern visibility on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) often prioritize content that aligns with popular opinion or generates high engagement. Marginalized individuals—Dalits, women, queer communities, and ethnic minorities—are frequently overlooked, their content buried under more mainstream narratives.

- **Prejudice-driven discrediting**: Even when these voices are heard, they are often met with suspicion or outright dismissal, particularly in comment sections or viral discourse. For example, when Black women or Dalit activists speak out against systemic oppression, they are often accused of overreacting, being emotional, or even lying—classic markers of testimonial injustice.

- **Epistemic trolling**: Deliberate undermining of someone's knowledge claims through mocking, baiting, or malicious questioning (e.g., "Where's your source?" even when one is provided) serves to delegitimize those challenging dominant narratives.

Hermeneutical Injustice: The Crisis of Meaning in Networked Cultures

Hermeneutical injustice occurs when people lack the interpretive tools to make sense of their social experiences due to structural gaps in collective understanding. Social media platforms often intensify this injustice:

- **New experiences, old frameworks**: Many online phenomena—cyberbullying, doxxing, cancel culture, online misogyny—are poorly understood by legal and philosophical frameworks rooted in pre-digital realities. Victims often struggle to articulate their suffering in accepted epistemic terms.

- **Language deficits in marginalized epistemologies**: Indigenous, subaltern, and queer worldviews often do not find representation in the dominant digital lexicon. For instance, Adivasi epistemologies or Bahujan spiritual philosophies are often collapsed under generic labels like "folk" or "myth" that diminish their philosophical depth. The public sphere lacks adequate hermeneutical resources to engage with these perspectives on their own terms.

- **Misinformation and epistemic chaos**: The overproduction of information online—much of it contradictory or deliberately false—has created an environment in which truth becomes contested, and meaningful interpretation itself is undermined. This leads to what some scholars call "epistemic nihilism"—a condition where no knowledge claim seems reliable, further marginalizing those already excluded from knowledge production.

III. DIGITAL EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY AND THE RISE OF THE INFLUENCER-EXPERT

One paradox of the social media age is the decline of traditional epistemic authorities (scientists, journalists, scholars) and the rise of "influencer-experts." While this

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shift may seem democratizing, it often entrenches new forms of epistemic injustice:

- **The illusion of equivalence**: In the horizontal structure of platforms, an anti-vaccine influencer's tweet may appear side-by-side with an epidemiologist's. The result is epistemic flattening—where every voice seems equally valid regardless of training, context, or expertise.

- **Gatekeeping via virality**: Instead of meritocratic or peer-reviewed validation, credibility is increasingly established via likes, retweets, and followers. This encourages performance over substance and leads to the marginalization of rigorous, nuanced knowledge.

Counter publics and the Resistance to Epistemic Injustice:

Despite these challenges, social media also enables resistance to epistemic injustice:

- **Epistemic counter publics**—Dalit Twitter, feminist Instagram pages, indigenous TikTok creators—have emerged as critical spaces of collective meaning-making, where silenced voices rearticulate their experiences and reclaim narrative control.

- **New hermeneutics**: Hashtags like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, or #DalitLivesMatter have created shared interpretive frameworks for understanding systemic violence, trauma, and resistance. These become tools to overcome hermeneutical gaps in mainstream discourse.

- **Collaborative knowledge production**: Platforms like YouTube and podcasts have allowed for long-form, in-depth content that can challenge superficial narratives and offer counter-epistemologies outside academic gatekeeping.

Toward an Epistemic Ethics of the Digital:

The epistemic landscape of the social media age is shaped by both unprecedented opportunity and significant danger. While digital platforms have the potential to redress historical epistemic injustices by amplifying marginalized voices and promoting epistemic diversity, they also risk perpetuating silencing mechanisms through algorithmic bias, digital populism, and the exploitative structures of platform capitalism. Addressing these challenges demands a critical rethinking of our digital ethics. This includes holding technology companies accountable for the amplification of prejudice and the suppression of dissent, investing in digital epistemic education to empower users to recognize bias, assess credibility, and value epistemic

pluralism, and developing inclusive hermeneutic frameworks that make space for diverse ways of knowing and being. Only through such multidimensional interventions can the digital public sphere evolve toward a more just epistemic environment—one in which all voices are not only heard but also respected and meaningfully engaged in the collective human pursuit of truth.

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